

What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*

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Wright's own indignation and the sickness of the age combined to make him dependent on violence and shock, to astonish the reader by torrential scenes of cruelty, hunger, rape, murder and flight, and then enlighten him by crude Stalinist homilies.

—Alfred Kazin

Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendent, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle; the one uttering merciless exhortations, the other shouting curses. And indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together.

—James Baldwin

In interpreting *Native Son*, critics have most often responded negatively both to those sections of the book that articulate Richard Wright's commitment to Communism¹ and to the violent deaths of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears. The former are said to be clumsily written and unevenly assimilated into the dramatic structure of the story. The latter are read as excessively brutal—undeniable evidence of the misogyny underlying Wright's work. I suggest here the extent to which these two subjects are inextricable and, as well, the significance of the relationship the novel establishes between violence against women and a class analysis. *Native Son* represents Wright's attempt to criticize, rather than to repeat, what Kazin characterized as "crude Stalinist homilies." Wright succeeds in this, I contend, by exposing how the fight for the workers' revolution is threatened

by the force tellingly portrayed by James Baldwin in the above quote as the "thrust and counter-thrust" of American racism.

Native Son is a proletarian novel—a novel that aims to convince its readers of the inevitability of a Marxist revolution.² Wright dramatizes the parasitic nature of the class system by telling the story of the wealthy Daltons' participation in the systematic exploitation and destruction of Bigger Thomas and his family. Wright's extensive work in the Communist Party as both a writer and an organizer led him to position *his* experiences of racial oppression within the context of international capitalist exploitation. In the essay "How Bigger Was Born" Wright explains how his contact with the radical movement allowed him to "feel far-flung kinships, and [to] sense . . . the possibilities of *alliances* between the American Negro and other people possessing a kindred consciousness."³ Because Wright believed that the coming revolution would be an uprising of black and white working-class Americans, he intended *Native Son* to address those issues that divided the races.

In "How Bigger Was Born" Wright explains how he chose the narrative that would make clear the necessity for interracial class revolution:

The far-flung items of [Bigger's] life had to be couched in imaginative terms, terms known and acceptable to a common body of readers, terms which would, in the course of the story, manipulate the deepest held notions and convictions of their lives. That came easy. The moment I began to write, the plot fell out, so to speak. . . . Any Negro who has lived in the North or the South knows that times without number he has heard of some Negro boy being picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with "rape." This thing happens so often that to my mind it had become a representative symbol of the Negro's uncertain position in America. (531–32)

For Wright, the most appropriate way to make clear the plight of blacks in capitalist America came via the narrative Angela Davis calls "the myth of the black rapist."⁴ *Native Son* is about what happens when black resistance is named "rape."

However, had Wright wished to demonstrate that "rape" was nothing more than a word used to suppress black resistance, there would be no rape in *Native Son*, only false accusations of rape. On the contrary, I contend that in *Native Son* the word "rape" also means sexual violence against women—in particular against black women. In this novel white and black women bear the brunt of the violence precipitated by the race-class system. However, Wright distinguishes carefully between the types of violence borne by these women. While *Native Son* illuminates the violence that occurs when the white female body is figured as a symbol of

capitalist power, the novel also makes clear that it is the black woman who suffers sexual violence because of it.

This distinction is crucial to the extent that it suggests a reconsideration of Wright's portrayal of women. There exists an ongoing and intensely felt critical discourse surrounding Wright's female characters and their fates. Save for Zora Neale Hurston,⁵ contemporary reviewers and critics failed to note the stereotypical portrayals and brutal fates of women characters in *Native Son*. However, critics in the last fifteen years have issued a striking corrective to this omission, focusing largely on the fates of the two murdered women as well as on the stereotypical portrayal of women—white and black—throughout Wright's oeuvre.⁶ This article reconsiders the usefulness of readings that either ignore the misogyny of the novel or that focus exclusively on it, glossing over the important distinctions Wright draws between how black and white women are treated.

Nell Irvin Painter explains how the symbol of rape was related to the "threat" of "social equality" after the Civil War:

Sex was the whip that white supremacists used to reinforce white solidarity. . . . Political slogans that spoke straightforwardly of property or wealth (which not all whites held) had failed to rally whites en masse. However, nearly all white men could claim to hold a certain sort of property, in wives, sisters, and daughters. . . . The sexually charged rhetoric of "social equality" invited all white men to protect their property in women and share in the maintenance of all sorts of power . . . in the name of protecting the sexuality of white womanhood.⁷

The myth of the black rapist controlled white women, terrorized the black community with the threat of lynching, and kept the white and black working classes at odds. In addition, the emphasis on protecting white womanhood concealed the sexual victimization of black women. The invisibility of black women's rape was a product of those stereotypes of female sexuality that, in part, supported the myth of the black rapist. While the white woman was cast as the desirable and inaccessible symbol of white power and culture, the black woman occupied the place of her opposite, the easily accessible symbol of the uncivilized, animalistic, black masses.⁸ Wright's focus on sexual violence, then, can be seen as a reaction to the way the twin threats of rape and lynching, and the stereotypes that supported them were used as ideological tools to split the working class along racial lines. As Painter puts it, the "horror of the mixing of the *classes* was an unacknowledged aspect of 'social equality'" (55, emphasis mine). Wright's *Native Son* demonstrates that as long as women's bodies served as sites of conflict between men, class solidarity would remain an impossibility.

In *Native Son* the threat of being that "Negro boy . . . picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with 'rape'" dominates Bigger's consciousness. Crucially, Bigger experiences this awareness in the form of sexual *desire* before he has even met Mary Dalton. That is, the other side of the threat of lynching is the desire to violate the taboo against miscegenation. The will to sexually possess the white woman substitutes for the desire to overthrow white supremacist society. Bigger's ideal sexual object choice manifests Wright's concern with the way that black male rebellion and dissatisfaction is sexualized and thus diverted by the myth of the black rapist. Wright uses a newsreel to make clear that this link between political and sexual desire is maintained by an American mass culture aiming to transform the collective political unrest of the black male community into a less dangerous form.

The newsreel viewed by Bigger and his friend Jack represents Mary as both an object of sexual desire *and* a symbol of white, capitalist power when she is introduced as one of the "little collection of debutantes [who] represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth" (34). Crucially, Wright connects this understanding explicitly to anti-Communist propaganda—thus linking the sexualization of the desire for black political agency to the problem of interracial working-class unity. In this scene from the newsreel, Wright reveals the contest over possession of the upper-class white female body by sexualizing the Communist Jan's "pursuit" of Mary over the beach:

Bigger saw in close-up the picture of a slight, smiling white girl whose waist was encircled by the arms of a man. . . . The close-up showed the smiling girl kissing the man, who lifted her up and swung her round. . . . The close-up faded and the next scene showed only the girl's legs running over the sparkling sands; they were followed by the legs of the man running in pursuit. The words droned on: *Ha! He's after her! There! He's got her! Oh, boy, don't you wish you were down here in Florida?* The close-up faded and another came, showing two pairs of legs standing close together. *Oh, boy!* said the voice. Slowly, the girl's legs strained upward until only the tips of her toes touched the sand. *Ah, the naughty rich!* (35)

This scene represents Mary as torn between Jan and her father, who, the newsreel's narrator intones, "summoned [her] home by wire from her winter vacation and denounced her Communist friend." The capitalist Mr. Dalton sees his daughter as the manifestation of his power—thus his disapproval of her relationship with the Communist Jan. This scene also shows why Bigger and his friends consciously think of white women as symbols of the system which oppresses them. When Jack tells Bigger, "when you start working there you gotta learn to *stand in* with her. Then

you can get everything you want" (36, emphasis mine), we see Wright positioning Jan and Bigger in competition over Mary who, on the beach, had been "standing close" to Jan. Bigger, Jack, and Jan—the two poor, young blacks and the white Communist—all desire Mary sexually because they desire the economic and social power for which she stands.

The newsreel sexualizes Mary, reducing her to a pair of legs, in order to reinforce her positioning as sexually inaccessible. Bigger and Jack's response to this presentation reveals the true intent of this paradox. They are aroused, as they are intended to be. Bigger's conjecture, "maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl," (37) and Jack's fantasy that "them rich white women'll go to bed with anybody," (36) reveal Mary's impossible position. Because Mr. Dalton, Jan, Bigger, and Jack all understand Mary only as a symbol, it seems impossible for her to desire at all.

As with Bigger, however, Mary's political desire is sexualized through the mythical narratives of the rape plot. Wright uses Mary's interest in labor unions metaphorically to indicate that her politically transgressive desires are expressed as sexually transgressive desires. In Bigger's first meeting with Mary, Wright raises the specter of miscegenation in terms of Communist rhetoric, in terms of illicit *union* between the races. Mary's first words to Bigger are to ask him whether he belongs to a union (58). Bigger understands this question is a dangerous one—not only because "in his mind unions and Communists were linked" (59)—but also because of Mary's position as the sexualized symbol of her father's power. Mary's provocative interest in unions, in Bigger, and in the Communist Jan indicates her refusal to stand in her rightful place, her refusal to be the symbol that prevents both the union of the races and the successful unionization of the black and white working classes.

Bigger notices right away that Mary refuses to play the role of humble, passive virgin. She is pushy—aggressively sexual and aggressive in speech and manner as well. Bigger thinks, "in all of the white women he had met . . . there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways" (67). Mary's transgression is quite evident when compared with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's description of the role of lady:

The connotations of wealth and family background attached to the position of lady in the antebellum South faded in the twentieth century, but the power of "ladyhood" as a value construct remained. The term denoted chastity, frailty, and graciousness. . . . Internalized by the individual, this ideal regulated behavior and restricted interaction with the world. . . . Women who abandoned secure, if circumscribed, social roles forfeited the claim to personal security."

According to the logic of the rape plot, Mary's behavior, her refusal to "stand her distance" from Bigger, leads to her grisly death. After he has murdered her, Bigger himself employs this equation when he thinks, "Gee, what a fool she was. . . . Carrying on that way! Hell, she *made* me do it! I couldn't help it! She should've left me alone" (128). The consequences of Bigger's inability to see the fallacy of this logic will become clear as this reading continues.

In all her interactions with Bigger, Mary violates her given place, and in most cases her violations are prompted by Jan. While on the one hand Mary's willingness to do what Jan tells her can be understood as proof of the superficial nature of her character, on the other, Jan's prompting of Mary to move beyond convention indicates the extent to which encouraging social relations between the races was a crucial part of the CPUSA's revolutionary agenda from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s.¹⁰ The events preceding her death makes Mary's transgression of place clear enough. When asking Bigger to drive to Communist Party headquarters to pick up Jan, Mary tells Bigger, "I'm on your side" (72), awakening in him the knowledge that, despite what she says, they occupy opposed places, or sides, within the socioeconomic order. Wright makes Bigger feel this opposition, even if he does not understand it, when, after Mary and Jan have him drive into the South Side, he thinks, "in his relations with her he felt that he was riding a seesaw; never were they on a common level; either he or she was up in the air" (82). This image of white and black bodies poised above and below is, I will show, quite important to Wright's vision.

Jan insists on doing away with the traditional physical distance between black and white, rich and poor, by making Bigger shake his hand and by sitting with Mary in the front seat of the car next to Bigger. In violating the physical space between white and black, Jan's intent is to move Mary and Bigger out of their opposed places. Mary's naive and humiliating speech to Bigger about how she wants to "go into these houses . . . and just *see* how your people live" (79) shows her desire to follow Jan's lead and to work toward a world where, in his words, "there'll be no white and no black; there'll be no rich and no poor" (78). Jan's request that Bigger take them to "one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places" (78) reveals that he is literally (albeit incredibly clumsily) trying to erase the distance between white and black worlds.

However, Jan's attempt to bring himself, Mary, and Bigger—a white man, a white woman, and a black man—into a position of union and equilibrium fails. When Jan insists on shaking Bigger's hand, the opposition between the white and black male bodies is manifest. Bigger feels the difference between them so acutely it seems to him as if he is at once both invisible and utterly naked:

He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? . . . He felt he had no physical existence at all right; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent. (76)

In taking Bigger's hand, Jan plunges him into the "No Man's Land," the "shadowy region" that can be understood in relation to what Houston Baker constructs as "black placelessness." Bigger's South Side, Baker writes,

lacks the quality of *place* as it is traditionally defined. For a place to be recognized by one as actually a PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one's *own place* is, from the perspective of human agency, *placeless*. Bereft of determinative control of boundaries, the occupant of authorized boundaries would not be secure in his or her own eulogized world but maximally secured by another, a prisoner of interlocking, institutional arrangements of power.¹¹

When Mary proclaims to Bigger, "I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*. . . . There are twelve million of them," she, also, inscribes Baker's notion of black placelessness onto Bigger (79, ellipsis Wright's). Jan's and Mary's clumsy attempt to create a "No Man's Land," a place of equality, only serves to remind him of the circumscribed place allotted to him. When they make Bigger acutely aware of his black skin and his black body, they simultaneously render him invisible and transparent. Bigger feels this placelessness through his body; at this moment he embodies black placelessness.

When Mary moves into the front seat between the two men, Bigger has a reaction that is also explicable in Baker's terms. At first Bigger is aroused by being so close to Mary. In obliterating the distance between them, Bigger urgently feels his own physicality: "There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls. Never in his life had he been so close to a white woman. He smelt

the odor of her hair and felt the soft pressure of her thigh against his own" (77). Squeezed uncomfortably between the two white people, Bigger feels confined; he is unavoidably aware of his own body, his sexuality, his desire. At the same time, Mary's absurdly ironic proclamation as they drive through the South Side ghetto that "this is a beautiful world" creates an urge in Bigger to violently erase, to disembody, himself and Jan and Mary: "Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out—with himself and them in it" (80). Jan and Mary's attempts at realizing social equality prompt Bigger to recognize his own placelessness. This recognition provokes sexual *and* violent desires in him. They make Bigger feel naked and aroused, and they make him feel he wants to destroy them—their bodies and their world.

Crucially, Bigger's reaction here anticipates his rape and murder of Bessie—whom he will beat repeatedly with a brick in order that he might "blot [her] out" (159). Wright's reference, at this moment in which the white woman's body is placed between white and black male bodies, to Bessie's impending and sexually violent death betrays another body at stake in the struggle to place black and white bodies together. In addition, this reference to Bessie's rape and murder includes Bigger's desire to "in some strange way rise up." Baker's theory of African American place also helps us to make sense of this need. Baker draws on Wright's description of the holds of slave ships in *Twelve Million Black Voices* to conclude that for Wright, the fetid, suffocating hole below the deck of the ship into which thousands of Africans were crowded for months at a time constituted their brutal birth into the European place. This confinement in the hole below the deck determines the placelessness of the American black and initiates a dialectic between the African and the European, between "blackness and the adventure of Western culture," that can be inscribed as a dialectical tension between a "below (*blackness*) and an above (*Western adventure*)" (107–8). When Jan violates the physical separation between classes and races by placing Bigger into intimate contact with Mary, Bigger feels placeless—in the hole. Simultaneously, he also feels the need to rise up and create a true place. This rising up (or, uprising) is expressed as a violent need to destroy others. In linking Bigger's desire for an uprising to Bessie's rape and murder through Bigger's need to "blot [others] out," Wright reveals the sexual violence that results from the displacement of the impulse toward radical political change.

In this way, then, Wright suggests that Jan's promotion of social equality leads to the murders of both women. Just as Bigger will soon be forced to "blot out" Mary in order to avoid being accused of raping her, he will eventually have to "blot out" Bessie in a rape scene that graphically

represents the crucial nature of the erasure of female agency for black male survival. By linking the two women together through Bigger's need to "blot [them] out," Wright resists the ideological oppositions that structure the rape plot wherein the black woman is presumed unrapable because of her inherent promiscuity and the white woman is presumed sexually cold because of her inherent chastity. Instead, *Native Son* shows how both Mary and Bessie—two female bodies—are violently blotted out in the struggle between white and black men. In making this claim, however, I do not mean to suggest that Mary's death and Bessie's death can in any way be conflated. As I will argue below, Wright is careful to show both why and how violence against black and white women in 1930s America takes crucially distinct forms.

This reference to Bigger's need to "blot [others] out" adds significance to two earlier moments in the novel. In the first Bigger thinks of Mary as one who "hit him between the eyes with her words and ways" (67) and in the second Jan exuberantly proclaims to Mary, "Gee, you're a brick!" because she has agreed to give the Party money for legal aid (87). While in the first case Mary is seen as hitting Bigger, in the second she is understood to be killing Bessie. In both of these cases, Mary—who is understood in the terms of the existing system as a symbol of white wealth and power—becomes that weapon, that "heavy object," that will "blot out" the bodies targeted by the existing system. When he figures Mary as both weapon and victim, we begin to see that while Wright opposes the bodies of black and white women in order to reveal the deadly pressures experienced by the black man, he also, simultaneously, aligns them in order to make clear that female bodies—white and black alike—are most often the victims of these pressures.

Mary's murder constitutes striking evidence that Wright is concerned primarily with the way that Bigger's sexual desire is, at root, a political desire. Throughout the scenes preceding the murder, it is clear that Mary's unwillingness to embody the symbol of white womanhood excites Bigger. As he watches her struggle drunkenly up to her bedroom he thinks, "she was beautiful, slender, with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all of that, she was white and he hated her. . . . [In] spite of his hate for her, he was excited standing here watching her like this" (93–94). Finally, completely supporting Mary's nearly unconscious body in his arms, Bigger carries Mary up the stairs, into her bedroom and to her white bed which is tellingly described, like the No Man's Land, as a "shadowy form":

He tried to stand her on her feet and found her weak as jelly. He held her in his arms again, listening in the darkness. His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. . . . Her face was buried in his

shoulder; his arms tightened about her. Her face turned slowly and he held his face still, waiting for her face to come round, in front of his. Then her head leaned backward, slowly, gently; it was as though she had given up. Her lips, faintly moist in the hazy blue light, were parted and he saw the furtive glints of her white teeth. Her eyes were closed. He stared at her dim face. . . . He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined. (96)

In this key scene, Bigger takes advantage of Mary's state of near-unconsciousness by manipulating her body so that it seems as if she is actively responding to him. Through this simulation, in which Bigger moves Mary's face toward his, Wright makes it clear Bigger *desires* consensual sex. For Bigger, the sight of Mary's face coming toward his is "like something he had imagined." This scene makes Wright's point that Bigger's desire to transgress the boundaries between white and black, rich and poor, is sexualized.

At this moment, Mary begins to manifest signs of desire herself. As Bigger kisses her, her "hips move in a hard and veritable grind . . . [and] her breath [comes] slow and deep" (96). Moments before, Mary was unable to move even her own head and therefore Bigger's desires controlled the scene. Now, however, Mary responds to Bigger. Both Mary's and Bigger's desires, I contend, are intended to register on a political level. Both are the consequences of an evening in which the bodies of a poor black man and a rich white woman were deliberately placed into intimate contact in order to begin to effect a world with "no white and no black . . . no rich and no poor."

The blind Mrs. Dalton is referred to repeatedly throughout *Native Son* as a ghost and at this moment her entrance into Mary's room is characteristically described as "ghostlike" (97). Mrs. Dalton represents the haunting negative of Mary—the not-quite-obsolete exemplar of white ladyhood as described in the previous quote from Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. As if to remind Mary of her proper place, Mrs. Dalton is the ghostly, disembodied, intrusion of convention. Bigger's fear of the conventional treatment of black men caught in situations like his, then, explains his need to silence Mary at this moment. As Bigger reacts to Mrs. Dalton's presence, his desire to do violence becomes indistinguishable from sexual desire:

Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and

covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight (97-98).

In contradistinction to the previous moments in which Bigger and Mary had moved together in the No Man's Land of consensual union, now Bigger's and Mary's bodies are locked back into the dialectic of place—of above and below. As Mary attempts to rise up and to reoccupy her position above him, Bigger must force her body down. It is at this moment, when Bigger, feeling "tight and full, as though about to explode" presses "all of his weight" onto Mary's upwardly surging body that Wright's description invokes rape.

It is important to point out that while Bigger does not rape Mary, Wright's portrayal of Mary's murder is replete with sexual imagery and sexual tension. Bigger and Mary are sexually engaged when Mrs. Dalton enters the room. As Bigger suffocates Mary, his actions are described in sexual terms. Though Mary's death can indeed be seen as accidental in the sense that Bigger does not intend to kill her, the sexualized portrayal of the scene suggests that Mary's death is, to a certain extent, predetermined by the race-class system—a system maintained by ideological narratives that sexualize racial difference. This is a murder that would not have happened had Bigger not perceived himself in imminent danger when caught in a white woman's room. In that sense, it is no simple accident. The scene continues:

He could see Mrs. Dalton plainly now. As he took his hands from the pillow he heard a long slow sigh go up from the bed into the air of the darkened room, a sigh which afterwards, when he remembered it, seemed final, irrevocable. . . . With each of [Mrs. Dalton's] movements toward the bed his body made a movement to match hers, away from her. (98)

Ultimately, it is Mary's death, her final "long slow sigh," that irrevocably reinstates these bodies into their traditional places. Once Bigger has fulfilled the role that the myth demands of him, once he has killed Mary, Mrs. Dalton replaces her daughter and hegemony is reestablished. The bodies of the black man and the white woman are again opposed. Bigger's negative enactment of Mrs. Dalton's movements mimic this reinstatement.

Just as Bigger and Mary experienced their political desires for one another as sexual desires, Bigger experiences the political implications of his sexually charged violence in his body. Here, images of fire and of heat dominate and, crucially, presage Mary's immolation in the furnace. As he lifts Mary's dead body from the bed, Bigger experiences something like what Mary might have experienced in her last moments had we been privy to her consciousness. As if *he* is on the bed, Bigger's fear is manifest

as extreme heat; he is "instantly wrapped in a sheet of blazing terror." Next, as if he was being stifled by the weight of a body pressing a pillow to his face, "a hard ache seized his head," and then finally "the white blur," Mrs. Dalton, "went away" (102). Even before Bigger shoves Mary into the fire, he experiences an extreme burning sensation. Lifting the trunk that contains her down two flights of stairs and into the basement, "the strap cut into his palm like fire" (103). Once in the basement, staring at the furnace, "his hand, seared with fire, slipped from the strap" (104). Here, as when Mary dies from the pressure of Bigger's weight bearing down on her, Bigger is unable to bear the weight of Mary's body. He feels as if the trunk which contains her "weigh[s] a ton" and, losing control, he drops it (104).

The description of the furnace further reinforces the parallel Wright carefully constructs between Bigger and Mary's bodies. Described, most notably as a "huge red bed of coals" that "blazed and quivered with molten fury" (104), the links between the furnace and the bed serve to make the reader aware of the sexual nature of Bigger's violence even when Bigger himself seems to forget it. The next morning he remembers "that he had killed Mary, had smothered her, had cut her head off and put her body into the fiery furnace" (109), but he does not remember his sexual desire. This denial will also play a key part in Bessie's rape and murder.

Mary's death, then, can be seen as a result of her refusal to be the disembodied symbol of white wealth and power. Wright means to show—but not to condone—the dire consequences for white woman of displaying sexual and (therefore) political desire. Mary continually violates the prescribed distance between white and black, rich and poor bodies. As long as her body is understood to be a chaste symbol of political and social power, she cannot be tolerated as a desiring agent. Her embodiment necessitates change, forces Bigger to act, to recognize his placelessness and to attempt to resist that placelessness by killing the "symbol of America's wealth." Once this deadly cycle has been enacted, however, the system moves to reinstate the hegemonic differences of above and below, place and placelessness. The disembodied figure of ladyhood—the ghostly Mrs. Dalton—replaces the unbearably bodied place formerly occupied by Mary.

The relationship between Wright's representation of Mary's murder and his representation of Bessie's rape and murder is a complex one that structures and then unstructures the conventional relationship between white and black female bodies. Mary's inability to keep her prescribed distance had set Bigger afire. Conversely, Bessie's initial *unwillingness* to offer her body to Bigger excites him. When Bigger first visits Bessie, he asks her why she is being so cold (149) and is aroused by her standoffish behavior: "he really did not mind her standing off from him; it made him

hunger more keenly for her" (151). Here, Wright continues the disassociation of women from their stereotypical sexualities begun with his portrayal of the dangerously unconventional Mary. While Mary, it seems, will "stand in" with either Bigger or Jan, poor black man or radical revolutionary, Bessie "stands off" from Bigger; counter to the stereotype of the black woman, she is cold and distant, like a white woman should be.

Bessie, however, does not remain sexually distant once Bigger offers her the money he has taken from Mary's purse. While on the one hand, Bessie's sexual opportunism is meant to reflect badly on her character, on the other Wright makes it clear that Bessie needs money. That is, just as Bigger is sexually aroused by Mary—the symbol of white wealth and power, Bessie is aroused by money, another such symbol. Through this similarity, Wright likens Bessie and Bigger's situations. Both have been made to devalue their own bodies and the bodies of others by the environment that warps them.

While Bigger's desire for Mary made him feel a hot, urgent, tension, Bigger's desire for Bessie is gentler, cooler, and makes him feel at peace. As they make love, "the thought and image of the whole blind world which had made him feel ashamed and afraid fell away as he felt her as a fallow field beneath him . . . and he slept in her body . . . being willingly dragged into a warm night sea to rise renewed to the surface to face a world he hated and wanted to blot out of existence" (153). Here, Bigger associates Bessie with his rural heritage, the "fallow field" which, in its opposition to the sterile city, has the power to "blot out" the circumstances that oppress him. Further reinforcing the link between Bessie and the rural folk, after having achieved orgasm, Bigger feels, "he was lying at the bottom of a deep dark pit upon a pallet of warm wet straw and at the top of the pit he could see the cold blue of the distant sky. Some hand had reached inside of him and had laid a quiet finger of peace upon the restless tossing of his spirit and had made him feel that he did not need to long for a home now" (154). Bigger thinks of union with Bessie as a way of regaining a place, a home, a "new sense of time and space." He is able to vanquish his feelings of placelessness when he is with her.

However, as Houston Baker points out, such a desire for the rural past is regressive rather than progressive because, according to the Marxist reading of history, only the urban proletariat can initiate revolution (129). Bigger's desire for Bessie, then, represents a nostalgic desire for a rural life which is, in reality, as—if not more—oppressive as that experienced in the city. In figuring "peace" with Bessie as a pre-urban home, Wright denies any revolutionary potential for their union. This denial contrasts with the vision of classless, interracial union invoked in his interactions with Mary. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that this fantasy of peace and home is Bigger's. Wright gives us no indication at all as to what Bessie can or cannot imagine.

The point is not just that Bessie possesses no political consciousness; rather, the point is that Bigger imagines she does not. After having made love to Bessie, Bigger feels that he is in a pit, as if he were in the hold of a slave ship. Bigger's own feelings toward Bessie inscribe him into the pit of black placelessness. The similarity between this pit and the airshaft into which he will shortly dump Bessie's body is key. In presaging Bessie's death at this moment of consensual union, Wright reveals that sexual violence within the black community is, in part, a product of the political anger provoked by the disjunction between the expectations that prompted so many blacks to leave the rural south and the exploitation they experienced when they arrived. This disappointment is displaced onto the black woman's body insofar as her body serves as the symbolic site of the rural idyll. Wright is careful to show, however, that this association between the black female body and the pre-urban south exists in the mind of the black man. Here he gives an example of the sexual violence that results from the transformation of the female body into a symbol.

One difficulty in evaluating Bessie's role in the novel is a result of Wright's decision to limit the perspective of the book to Bigger's consciousness. For this reason, what Bessie feels is unavailable to us—just as were Mary's feelings and consciousness. While I feel it is important to point out that Bigger's genuine feelings of kinship and connection with Bessie are based in the shared folk history of the black community, it is clear that without access to Bessie's consciousness, the reader is necessarily limited to understanding their lovemaking as a moment that communicates Bigger's need to find a home. This problem is manifest in Bigger's feeling that sex with Bessie allows him to "blot out" the oppression he feels living in the world. Soon, of course, Bessie herself will be blotted out—by Bigger as he rapes and kills her. The repetition of this phrase reveals that the peace that Bigger gains from their lovemaking is not a peace shared by Bessie. Wright thus reveals here and elsewhere that when they are together, Bigger's feelings and needs always blot out Bessie's.

The revelation that Bessie is merely the means toward which Bigger gains comfort and peace does not necessarily mean that Wright—or the text—condones this view of black female (non)subjectivity. It is crucial to see that black and white female subjectivity pose different problems for Wright. While Wright wants to make clear that the maintenance of the existing system depends in part upon violence aimed toward both black and white female bodies, his task is frustrated by the extent to which the rape plot—which he has chosen as the means to communicate this idea—fabricates the rapes of white women while erasing the actual rapes of black women. Wright must find a way of representing the erasure of black female desire and agency that makes clear the crucial *difference* between Bessie's erasure and the erasure of white female agency.

Bessie's sexually violent death is both likened and opposed to Mary's death through the use of images of coldness. Bigger and Bessie are constantly assaulted by the cold as they try to flee. The "icy blast of wind" that strikes Bigger in the face as they leave Bessie's apartment presages their journey "into the snow, over the frozen streets, through the sweeping wind" (266). The abandoned, snow-covered tenement that will be the site of Bessie's death is overwhelmingly cold in stark and deliberate contrast to the amply heated Dalton household. When they lie down together in the tenement, Bigger is warmed by the whiskey but Bessie, unlike Mary, remains cold—literally and sexually. Bessie's coldness, again, sexually arouses Bigger:

He laid his fingers upon Bessie's shoulders; slowly he felt the stiffness go out of her body and as it left the tensity in his own rose and his blood grew hot.

"Cold?" he asked in a soft whisper.

"Yeah," she breathed.

"Get close to me . . ."

"I'm cold all over. I feel like I'll never get warm." (269)

Here Wright opposes male and female, hot and cold, bodies. This opposition betrays the way the displacement of the desire for political change results in violence toward female bodies. Simultaneously, however, in contrasting Bessie's coldness to Mary's hotness, he is also opposing white and black female bodies—thus pointing to the important differences between them in relation to the rape plot. As Bigger continues to press Bessie for sex and finally to rape her, the strategy of emphasizing the differences between Bessie and Mary becomes even more apparent:

He kissed her; her lips were cold. He kept kissing her until her lips grew warm and soft. A huge warm pole of desire rose in him, insistent and demanding. . . .

"Please, Bigger. . . ."

She tried to turn from him, but his arm held her tightly; she lay still, whimpering. He heard her sigh, a sigh he knew, for he had heard it many times before; but this time he heard in it a sigh deep down beneath the familiar one, a sigh of resignation, a giving up, a surrender of something more than her body . . . His cold fingers touched her warm flesh, and sought still warmer and softer flesh. Bessie was still, unresisting, without response. His icy fingers touched inside of her and at once she spoke, not a word, but a sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted. Her breath went out of her lungs in long

soft gasps that turned to a whisper of pleading.
 "Bigger . . . *Don't!*" (269-70)

Bessie's repeated verbal resistance belies Bigger's understanding that Bessie is resigned and has given up and accepted the horror of rape. In fact, Wright makes clear that Bessie protests the whole while. Though Bigger does not hear her, the reader can:

Her voice came to him now from out of a deep, far-away silence and he paid her no heed. The loud demand of the tensity of his own body was a voice that drowned out hers. . . . He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted. He flung the cover back, ignoring the cold, and not knowing that he did it. Bessie's hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding. (270)

As he rapes Bessie, Bigger is unconscious both to Bessie's protest and to his surroundings:

He had to now. Yes. Bessie. His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her. Yes. Bessie. Now. He had to now. *don't Bigger don't* He was sorry, but he had to. He. He could not help it. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it now. She should. Look! She should should should look. Look at how he was. He. He was. He was feeling bad about how she would feel but he could not help it now. Feeling. *Bessie*. Now. All. He heard her breathing heavily and heard his own breath going and coming heavily. *Bigger*. Now. All. All. Now. All. *Bigger* . . . (270)

Bigger's utter unselfconsciousness is manifest in the scene's increasingly fragmented sentence structure. With Mary, Bigger's actions are predetermined by the knowledge that what he does is one part of a very public play of forces. He feels "strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (95). With Bessie however, Bigger feels no one is watching. He is free to commit rape because he knows, subconsciously at least, that those in power don't care what he does to her. Whereas Mary's room, her bed, the door, are clearly described in relation to what is going on between them, the tenement literally disappears as Bigger rapes Bessie. Such a contrast reflects the difference in attention paid to the rapes of white and black women. For Bigger the difference is clear. While Mary's every word and action aroused Bigger's desire,

Bessie's desires and actions mean absolutely nothing to him. It simply does not matter what Bessie wants, does, or says. All that matters is Bigger's "now," Bigger's "all," Bigger.

After killing Mary, Bigger's "body was instantly wrapped in a sheet of blazing terror" (102). After killing Bessie, however, images of coldness predominate. The "shawl whose strands were woven of ice" recalls both the "sheet of blazing terror" in which he is wrapped after killing Mary and the wind that "moaned and died down, like an idiot in an icy black pit" that he hears after raping Bessie. Because of the way the rape plot opposes and simultaneously creates attraction between black men and white women, Bigger's feelings are likened through imagery of heat and fire to what literally happens to Mary's body. Conversely, because of the way the rape plot erases the sexual victimization of black women, Bigger's hot desire is opposed to Bessie's coldness. Bessie is literally frozen out of the story.

The differences, then, between these two scenes of violence against women should make clear that at least part of Wright's intent in representing such violence was to draw attention to the historical invisibility of black women's rapes and of their continuing devaluation in American society. This difference is also manifest in the ways that the women's bodies are discovered. Mary's fate is made visible not long after her murder when her ashes rise to choke those in the Dalton home. Bessie's corpse, on the other hand, is not discovered until it begins to rot in the airshaft of the abandoned tenement. This difference reinscribes the dialectic of above and below, of place and placelessness, onto these women's bodies and it also suggests that a transformative politics is possible only when violence against women is visible. Though Bessie's body finally does become visible, its use as evidence of the crime against Mary points tellingly to the different problems involved in recovering the stories of black and white women. In addition, it is useful to contrast Mary's disembodied return—her manifestation as ashes and smoke—to Bessie's undeniably physical half-frozen, rotting corpse. This difference points again to the different ideologies of white and black female sexuality—those of the ethereal, asexual white woman and the sickeningly fleshy, promiscuous black woman.

Alongside these important differences it is necessary to briefly point out the similarities between these two scenes. In both cases, Bigger is excited by the fact that the woman seems as if she has "given up." In fact, in Bessie's case, it seems that Bigger needs so badly to feel that Bessie has given up that he imagines it. Also, that resignation is signaled by breathing, by a deep sigh. These similarities, along with Bigger's need, in both cases to blame the victim after the crime has been committed, show that Bigger is unaware of the extent to which the forces that victimize him are related to his sexual feelings toward the two women. He does not see that the shame he feels as a result of the myth of the black rapist, his shame

in having black skin, links his sexual desire irrevocably to his desire to do violence. In fact, in both cases, Bigger seems instantly to forget about his sexual reactions and comes to focus narrowly on the act of murder. Bigger's attention is diverted immediately after he rapes Bessie to the need to murder her just as he had forgotten completely about his desire for Mary until Bessie reminded him, "they'll say you raped her." Bigger's response to the now dead Bessie is telling in this context:

He had entirely forgotten the moment when he had carried Mary up the stairs. So deeply had he pushed it all back down into him that it was not until now that its real meaning came back. They would say he had raped her and there would be no way to prove he had not. That fact had not assumed importance in his eyes until now. . . . Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to a woman. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. . . . But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (262)

In this passage, Bigger, claiming that "rape was not what one did to a woman," tries to transform his act of violence against Mary into an act of racial hostility between men. His memory of the desire he felt as he carried her up the stairs leads him to link the sexual transgression this act represents to the political suppression that he knows will result. This suppression is inextricably linked, in his mind, to the word "rape." Bigger therefore admits to "rape" but not to raping Mary. That is, he admits to having committed an act that will drive white society to murder him, but he will not admit that he has done that kind of violence to Mary's body. His claim that "rape" happens to him when he feels "the strain of living" as a black man demonstrates his disassociation of the word "rape" from sexual violence against women.

This disassociation is telling. While Bigger will be accused of rape, Wright makes it clear that he does not rape Mary. However, Bigger *does* rape and when he does so he is in the same state of mind that he is when he kills Mary; he is sexually aroused by the fact that he is defying white supremacist society. In this way *Native Son* demonstrates that while white and black women alike are victims in the struggles between men, the myth of the black rapist ensures that black women, not white women, are most often the victims of rape.

The distance between Bigger's narrow understanding and the text's understanding is clear. It is necessary to juxtapose Bigger's belief that

"rape was not what one did to a woman. . . . He committed rape every time he looked into a white face" with the fact that when Bigger looks into Mary's white face, he wants to have sex with her, even if she is not conscious enough to consent and even though he knows that his act will be interpreted as rape. As well, Bigger's insistence that whites "choke you off the face of the earth. . . . They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you" (409) must be read in the light of Bessie's rape where Bigger comes after Bessie so hot and hard that he cannot allow himself to recognize her protests, her feelings, her will. Bigger does not recognize what he does to Bessie as rape. However, the reader is permitted to hear both Bessie's protests and to see that Bigger does not hear them. In these ways, it is clear that *Native Son* fully represents the complexity of a situation in which "rape" is both a word used in the battle between men *and* a word that describes violent acts committed on the bodies of women.

In structuring representations of sexual violence in *Native Son* around an opposition between white and black female sexuality—an opposition both manifest and then collapsed through the dialectical relations of place and placelessness—Wright suggests that the fate of the black woman is so linked to the narrative of the rape plot that he cannot *not* represent it. At the same time, however, to make Bessie's rape and murder so visible is to diverge from realism, for the violations of black women were made invisible through this narrative. Therefore, Wright's task is to reveal the crucial nature of the myth of black female sexuality to this narrative without misrepresenting the black woman's historical fate. That is, he had to make Bessie's invisibility visible. Bigger's repeated thoughts, "he could not take her with him, he could not leave her behind" illustrate this paradox. Wright also reinforces this point by making visible other raped women—women whom Bigger does not rape. While the women Buckley mentions in his interrogation of Bigger are without a doubt white women, their numbers suggest the prevalence of sexual violence. Their whiteness coupled with the use of Bessie's body in Mary's trial make present uncounted numbers of raped black women—the women of whom Buckley will never speak unless their rapes give him some information about the violations of white women. Wright's careful attention to the differences between the treatment of white and black women in relation to rape highlights the problematic nature of the invisibility of sexual violence committed against black women.

It is through the merger of image and location—of heat and cold and up and down—that the necessity for revolutionary change becomes clear. Bigger's inability to understand what he does as rape is crucial. His experience growing up has shown him that rape is not an act committed against women but is instead a tool of white supremacy directed primarily against black men. Until the end of the text, Bigger

simply cannot understand the word in any other way. This gap between Bigger's understanding and the text's leads me to suggest that *Native Son* is meant, in part, to reveal the workings of this system and to show how the abolition of sexualized violence is intrinsic to the vision of a classless society invoked by Wright. As long as men like Bigger cannot understand that rape is what happens to a woman they will continue to act out their rebellion in sexually violent ways—to misplace their acts of aggression, to harm women instead of to attack a patriarchal system that sexualizes the desire for political dominance as a way of dividing and exploiting the oppressed.

Furthermore, to the extent that Jan's promotion of social equality precipitates Mary's and Bessie's violent deaths, it is necessary to read *Native Son* as Wright's warning to the CPUSA. Failing to take into account the psychosexual aspects of American racism while forming interracial alliances, the text cautions, will result in the victimization of black and white women. A brief examination of the conversations between Bigger and Max makes this final point evident.

When Max asks Bigger what Mary had done to deserve murder, Bigger first critically examines the connection between his political and his sexual desires. In attempting to explain his ambivalence to Max, Bigger stumbles upon a revelation:

"She asked me a lot of questions. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog. I was so mad I wanted to cry". . . . He was caught in a net of vague, associative memory: he saw an image of his little sister, Vera, sitting on the edge of a chair crying because he had shamed her by "looking" at her; he saw her rise and fling her shoe at him. He shook his head, confused. "Aw, Mr. Max, she wanted me to tell her how Negroes live. She got into the front seat of the car where I was." (405)

Bigger remembers here how Vera's shame at being stared at as an object had prompted her to violence. He begins to connect his own feelings of shame and the violence they inspired to the feelings of shame that he had regularly inspired in others. Furthermore, Bigger connects this memory directly to the moment when Mary got into the front seat with him—the moment when her objectifying request to find out how "they" lived first prompted his desire to "blot [her] out" and that led, ultimately, to his sexual excitement and then to her death.

While Bigger's new understanding is prompted by Max's question, "did you rape her, Bigger?" Max remains essentially unable to understand the reasons for the sexual nature of Bigger's feelings. Max can find no logic in Bigger's statement that he both hated and was sexually excited by Mary. Max's response to Bigger shows that he cannot understand the

connections Bigger is beginning to make sense of. When Max tries to convince Bigger that Mary was not trying to hurt him, that she was being "kind" to him, Bigger is outraged:

"Kind, hell! She wasn't kind to me!"

"What do you mean? She accepted you as another human being."

"Mr. Max, we're all split up. What you say is kind ain't kind at all. I didn't know nothing about that woman. All I knew was that they kill us for women like her. We live apart. And then she comes and acts like that to me." (405)

While Bigger understands that it would have been impossible for him to have seen Mary as a person rather than a symbol, Max does not. To Max, Mary is a human being trying to teach Bigger the lessons of Marxism. To Bigger, Mary is a white woman. As he says, he doesn't know anything about her, he only knows that someone like her could get him killed. Max's plea that Bigger "should have tried to understand" Mary's behavior betrays his utter inability to understand. Max continues to press the point when he asks "you say you hated her and yet you say you felt like having her when you were in the room and she was drunk and you were drunk" (406). While the lawyer's befuddlement provides Bigger another opportunity to clarify things for himself, the situation never makes sense to Max. Bigger's reply that "I reckon it was because I knew I oughtn't've wanted to. I reckon it was because they say black men do that anyhow" (406) passes Max by. Instead of helping Bigger to explore the sexual dynamics of the situation, Max responds to Bigger's discovery of how women become objects of violence by merely repeating Bigger's initial understanding of his actions as retaliation against white men. Max's reply, "you mean you wanted to defy them?" (407) obscures Bigger's meaning. Like Bigger who earlier felt that "rape was not what one did to a woman," Max erases Mary completely and articulates the struggle as one between men. Further, Max's utter lack of concern about Bigger's motives for raping and killing Bessie also demonstrates his inability to make sense of the sexual aspect of Bigger's crimes.

It is notable that of all the reasons Max gives for Bigger's behavior in his final statement to the court, he does not mention the myth of the black rapist. While Max presents Bigger as a symbol of the fate the black working class in America (444), he is unable to see Mary as one symbol of the female condition under the system he expounds against. Like Buckley, who reinscribes Mary into the position of chaste symbol by locating Bigger as the black rapist when he insists "the central crime here is *rape!*" (481), Max too ignores the dynamics that position white women as desirable objects preventing interracial solidarity. Though insisting that unless

Bigger is given his life "we [will] find our daughters murdered and burnt!" (456), Max has no insight into the process whereby women become sacrificial victims in the struggle between men. In his summation, Max represents Mary as no different from Mr. or Mrs. Dalton:

Mary Dalton, a well-intentioned white girl with a smile upon her face, came to Bigger Thomas to help him. Mr. Dalton, feeling vaguely that a social wrong existed, wanted to give him a job so that his family could eat and his sister and brother could go to school. Mrs. Dalton, trying to grope her way toward a sense of decency, wanted him to go to school and learn a trade. . . . The relationship between the Thomas family and the Dalton family was that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer. The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money. But, my friend, gold was not enough! Corpses cannot be bribed! Say to yourself, Mr. Dalton, "I offered my daughter as a burnt sacrifice and it was not enough." (457)

While Max's Marxist analysis of the relationship between the Daltons and the Thomases accurately represents the parasitic nature of the class system, it utterly ignores the sexual dynamic between Bigger and Mary—the very dynamic that acted as the catalyst to murder. Mary did not just come to Bigger "to help him." Mary's desire to help Bigger was expressed as a sexual desire that Bigger was conditioned to be unable to resist.

Max doesn't see the different forms that hatred toward those whose exploitation is necessary to maintain the system can take. Therefore, he cannot see that hatred toward blacks is sexualized. This lack of understanding obscures Mary's crucial role in the crime and, as well, prevents him from understanding what Bigger finally begins to comprehend before his death—that violence toward women is an inevitable product of the existing system. Because Max's ultimate goal is to equate the black man's struggle in America to the larger, international class struggle, his attempt to convince Bigger that "they hate others too" (402–3) fails utterly. Bigger rightly denies the equation Max is trying to make, insisting on a quantitative difference between the hatred aimed at the black man and the hatred aimed at the Jewish and/or Communist man. Wright himself expressed this reservation before his final break with the party. In a letter responding to *Daily Worker* editor Mike Gold's belated and grudging public support for *Native Son*, Wright wondered,

Are we Communist writers to be confined merely to the political and economic spheres of reality and leave the dark and hidden places

of the human personality to the Hitlers and Goebbels? I refuse to believe such Not to plunge into the complex jungle of human relationships and analyze them is to leave the field to the fascists and I won't and can't do that. If I should follow Ben Davis's (a fellow black Communist) advice and write of Negroes through the lens of how the party views them in terms of political theory, I'd abandon the Bigger Thomases. I'd be tacitly admitting that they are lost to us, that fascism will triumph because it alone can enlist the allegiance of those millions whom capitalism has crushed and maimed.

And later, after Wright's break with the party, he expressed his desire to write a novel that would elaborate on the black man's "spiritual journey" as distinct from his "material" one. "I had once thought that Communism was an instrument for that," Wright confessed bluntly, "but now I don't know."¹²

Through Max's and Bigger's final dialogue, Wright reveals that it is only in the course of attempting to construct analogies between the experiences of diverse groups within the working class that an understanding of potentially divisive differences can become clear. *Native Son* insists that such an understanding of differences, unless brought into the light, will prevent the formation of a united, revolutionary proletariat.

The ultimate example of this threat to working-class solidarity is manifest in Max's reaction to Bigger's final articulation of his own position. Bigger's famous "what I killed for, I am!" (501) constitutes the black man's awareness of the forces that sexualize racism. As Bigger's only statement of positive identity, the phrase reveals the process of the substitution of political desire for sexual desire. Having been identified as a black rapist and having become that rapist, Bigger killed for the right to have what white men have—white women. For Max, this is not a sufficient reason to have killed because he does not see how the white woman stands for the power of the capitalist class as a whole. Max's final actions, his blind groping for his hat (501), reveal his ultimate inability to see what the brutal fates of Mary, Bessie, and Bigger really stand for. In their last moments together, Max cannot bear to look Bigger in the eye. His horror represents for Wright the horrible truth that the CPUSA cannot take into account. Women are exploited, raped, and killed in a capitalist society that is also patriarchal, because they are women and not just because they are poor.¹³ Wright's interest in this violence might well have been reflected in the novel he worked on but never completed right after *Native Son*. Tentatively entitled *Little Sister*, (perhaps a reference to Vera) it was intended to be about "the status of women in modern American society" (539).¹⁴

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NOTES

1. See Arnold Rampersad, Introduction to *Native Son* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1996), xxv, for a brief discussion of this criticism. See Harold Bloom's Introduction to *Richard Wright's Native Son* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) for a recent example of it.

2. The term "proletarian fiction" refers to a specific body of works, written mainly in the 1920s and 1930s, that were composed either by members of the CPUSA or by fellow travelers. While there was considerable debate at the time as to those criteria that would establish a novel as part of this genre, in general proletarian novels adhere to the Marxist theory of history, portraying a community of exploited workers (sometimes through a representative character like Bigger Thomas) and their success or failure to inspire radical consciousness and, ultimately, revolutionary action. See Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

3. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 515. All subsequent quotations from *Native Son* and "How Bigger Was Born" are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 172-210.

5. By the 1980s the harsh dialogue between Hurston and Wright had become for critics a kind of archetype for the gender divide in African American literary history. Recent critics, however, have understood this highly public dispute differently. Carla Capetti, in *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), reads this exchange in terms of allegiances to different sociological schools. Ultimately, she argues, Wright and Hurston are both addressing a sociological dilemma that preoccupied many writers of the era—whether they be black or white, male or female. This is the "disjunction between tradition and modernity" articulated through the conflict faced by an individual who dares to speak against the community (196-97). In *New Negro, Old Left*, James Miller builds on Capetti's reading, disputing even the existence of an irresolvable difference between the two writers. Examining their writings from the period during which they exchanged barbs (1937-38), Miller understands Wright's Communism and Hurston's Boasian anthropology alike as instruments that provided the writers with "a constructive kind of African American double consciousness . . . allowing [them] to see [their] birth cultures as both subject and object, thus ensuring that black difference could not be interpreted as black deficiency." Ultimately, Miller understands Hurston's and Wright's work in the late 1930s as a "shared endeavor to protect the rural black folk from the worst of the Great Migration" (176). Capetti and Miller elaborate their arguments in great detail (Capetti, 182-97, Miller, 153-78). I mention them here only to point out that recent critical reappraisals of the relationship between these two important figures in African American literary history reject the consensus view that gender difference primarily shaped and determined their disagreement.

6. See Zora Neale Hurston's review of *Native Son* in *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995). For more current criticisms see Trudier Harris, "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters" in

New Essays on Native Son, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 18 (Winter 1984), 139–45; Alan W. France, "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's *Native Son*," in *Bigger Thomas*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 151–60; Sylvia Keady, "Richard Wright's Women Characters and Inequality" in Butler, 43–49; Maria K. Mootry, "Bitches, Whores, and Women Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright," in *Richard Wright*, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1984); Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright" in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 63–82.

7. Nell Irvin Painter, "'Social Equality,' Miscegenation, Labor, and Power" in *The Evolution of Southern Culture*, ed. Numan V. Bartely (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 49.

8. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* (Summer 1987): 64–81; Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 166–78.

9. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence" in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 335–36.

10. For detailed historical accounts of particular party organizations and movements promoting racial equity and interracial alliances, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). See also Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). For a more general overview of CPUSA policy on race, see Foley, 170–212.

11. Houston A. Baker Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 104.

12. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 185–86, 273.

13. In making this statement I do not mean to suggest that women are the only victims of violence in *Native Son*. Surely the violence that Bigger commits against Jan, first when he pulls a gun on him and then when he attempts to frame him for murder, should not be dismissed. These moments demonstrate that the Communist man is also the object of violence in the race-class system. However, my point is that the victims of actual physical violence in this novel are women. Despite Bigger's desire to "blot out" Jan, he does not succeed in doing so. Female bodies alone become the sites of actual physical violence. It is this dynamic, I argue, that interests Wright.

14. Because I believe this text to be crucially important in ascertaining Wright's evolving views on the place of gender ideology in the race-class system, I am currently working on this unfinished manuscript in the hopes of bringing about the publication of an edited version with a critical introduction.